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TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON KIRF SCUL CH

SUBJECT: SHANGHAI'S JEWISH COMMUNITY: BALANCING CULTURAL PRESERVATION, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

CLASSIFIED BY: BEATRICE CAMP, CONSUL GENERAL, US CONSULATE SHANGHAI, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

#### Summary

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¶1. (C) Shanghai's rapid economic development leaves room for the appreciation of Jewish history and culture, but not for greater religious freedom or historic preservation. Local officials and religious scholars admire the contributions of Jews and Jewish culture to China and Shanghai, but dismiss claims that the city is sacrificing Jewish historical sites for the sake of economic development, and do not believe official recognition of Judaism is an urgent issue. Shanghai's principal Jewish religious leader contended that government bureaucracy prevents recognition of Judaism, resulting in harassment from local authorities and only partial access to the spiritually significant Ohel Rachel Synagogue. End Summary.

#### The History of Jews in China: Shanghai's Contribution

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¶2. (U) Jews have lived in China since the 8th Century. Pan Guang, religious and cultural advisor to the Shanghai Government, and Dean of the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai, characterizes Jewish migration to China as a series of waves. The first wave of Jews followed the Silk Road into China, finally settling in the city of Kaifeng. The ancient "Kaifeng Jews" eventually lost touch with Jews outside of China and assimilated into Han Chinese culture. A second wave of Jews, from Baghdad and Bombay, followed the opium trade to Hong Kong and Shanghai in the mid-1800s. These Sephardic Jews are well known for helping to build these European colonial cities into Asian economic hubs. A third wave of Jews fled anti-Semitism in Russia in the late 1800s and migrated primarily to Northeast China, but also settled in the coastal cities of Tianjin, Qingdao, and Shanghai. Finally, a fourth wave of 20,000-plus Jews fled persecution in Europe preceding and during World War II and sought refuge in Shanghai.

¶3. (C) The enabling factors for the WWII wave of Jewish migrants are the subject of some dispute. Shanghai's local academics and government promote the story that Chinese authorities enabled the Jewish migration to Shanghai by issuing visas to many Jews fleeing Austria, and by offering "visa free" passage to Shanghai for Jews in other locations. However, Rabbi Shalom D. Greenberg of the Jewish Center of Shanghai, the principal leader of Shanghai's Jewish community, feels strongly that the Chinese Government and local academics are attempting to re-write history to serve their own purposes. He asserts that Shanghai in the 1930s was a "wild west" controlled by foreign concessions. It was really these foreign concessions, not any

concerted efforts by the Chinese Government, which permitted safe passage into Shanghai for the vast majority of refugees. Furthermore, he points out that it was the Chinese Communist Party that drove most of the Jews out of Shanghai in 1949.

**¶4. (U)** Currently, Shanghai's Jewish population is entirely expatriate. Jews started to move back to the city during China's reform and opening movement in the late 1970s and early 80s. According to Rabbi Greenberg, about 2,000 Jews now live in Shanghai. The vast majority are non-orthodox, although the leaders of the community, Rabbi Greenberg and his brother Rabbi Avraham Greenberg, are from the ultra-orthodox Chabad Lubavitch sect. A small community of Sephardic Jews has recently re-established a center in Shanghai.

From Marx to Madoff: Chinese Views on Jewish Culture

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**¶5. (C)** Chinese officials often use Jewish culture as a bridge between socialism and capitalism. Both Yan Kejia, Director of the Religious Studies Institute at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), and Pan Guang report that the recent contributions of Jews provide Chinese officials with the opportunity to praise socialist thought and literature (e.g. Marx), while at the same time admiring scientific progress (e.g. Einstein), and capitalist success (e.g. Bloomberg). This assessment fits well with the Party's promotion of a "socialist market economy," and was reflected in official speeches at a recent event in Shanghai celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Jewish writer, Sholem Aleichem.

**¶6. (C)** Despite a diverse cultural history, Jews in China are victim to deeply ingrained stereotypes. Yan Kejia and Pan Guang agreed that the current popular perception in Shanghai describes Jews as very smart and extremely good with money. These stereotypes are related to the historical economic success of Jews in Shanghai, and are further fueled by modern media. Pan cited a recent case where a book entitled, "How the Jews Make Money," which falsely claimed to be authored by the Dean of Harvard Business School, sold out at Shanghai book stores. While Jews in Shanghai are heavily stereotyped, the city has remained distinctly absent of any overt anti-Semitism. Although, with names such as Alan Greenspan and Bernard Madoff receiving negative publicity regarding the economic downturn, local rumors have emerged that the Jews are responsible for the global financial crisis.

**¶7. (C)** Broadening Chinese perceptions of Jews through religious and cultural education and research may not have much promise in Shanghai. Rabbi Greenberg, who has lived in Shanghai for eleven years, has given up trying to challenge stereotypes, claiming the task is impossible. Researchers Yan Kejia and Pan Guang believe that educating the Chinese population about the story of the Jewish people and their cultural contribution to Shanghai is one of their greatest responsibilities. However, they also are not hopeful that they can have an impact in the face of ingrained popular thought. Pan reports that continued research of Jewish and other religious and cultural issues depends on small grants from the Chinese National Foundation of Social Sciences Studies. Yan added that funding for all religious and cultural studies is extremely limited.

The Party Giveth: Highlighting Cultural Contributions

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**¶8. (U)** Despite the negative outlook from local academics, there have been some efforts to promote awareness of Jewish culture in Shanghai. The Consul General recently participated in an event commemorating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sholem Aleichem, the Jewish author whose short stories were transformed into the Broadway sensation, "Fiddler on the Roof." The event was inspired by the unique life story of Sholem Aleichem and the dedicated efforts of a local Chinese translator of his works. Approximately 200 attended, including Shanghai Vice Mayor Zhao Wen, representatives from the Israeli, Ukrainian, and Russian Consulates, and lecturers and students from all of the major universities in Shanghai. As cited by participants during the discussion, the event clearly expressed appreciation for the

contributions of Jews to Shanghai's society and to global progress. (Note: Former President Jimmy Carter discussed Shanghai's Jewish history with Mayor Han Zheng during a January 2009 visit, noting that his Treasury Secretary, Michael Blumenthal, had written a book about his childhood in Shanghai as a refugee from the Holocaust. There is a plaque marking Blumenthal's former house in the Jewish Quarter. End Note.)

¶19. (U) On April 2, Concordia International School of Shanghai hosted Ho Manli, the daughter of Ho Fengshan, the Chinese Consul who was posted in Vienna prior to World War II and issued visas to many of the Jews who fled to Shanghai. Local media took advantage of Ho Manli's visit to laud her father's contributions. An April 3 article in the English-language China Daily newspaper reported on Ho Manli's visit to a special "Visas for Life" exhibit at the Chinese Refugees Museum where she met with relatives of Holocaust survivors who were issued visas by her father, Ho Fengshan, Chinese Consul General in Vienna from 1938 to 1940. (Note: On June 11, 2008, then-Consul General Jarrett, Ms. Ho, and Martin Gold of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad (USCPAH) participated in the unveiling of a marker at Shanghai's Ohel Moshe Synagogue commemorating Dr. Ho's rescue of several thousands of Jews in Austria by issuing visas and other documents in contravention of superiors' orders. All those whose travel to Shanghai Dr. Ho facilitated survived the war and many thereafter moved to the United States. The June 11 ceremony was attended by Shanghai and Beijing officials, Shanghai academics, the Rabbis Greenberg and other members of Shanghai's Jewish community, and Consular Corps representatives. End note.)

#### The Party Taketh Away: Demolishing Historic Buildings

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¶10. (C) In sharp contrast to events promoting Jewish culture, the Shanghai Municipal Government is in the process of tearing down several Jewish cultural relics. National Public Radio (NPR) recently aired a story on the demolition of historic buildings in the old Jewish Quarter in Shanghai's Hongkou District, which CongenOff visited and personally observed buildings in the process of being torn down to make way for a road expansion project. NPR's story attracted much attention in the local media, resulting in a small grassroots effort to save buildings, or at least parts of them, from demolition. The status of the preservation effort is unclear, but the issue has received attention at high levels in the Shanghai Municipal Government, as well as by the Israeli and German Consulates.

¶11. (C) Pan Guang categorically dismissed claims that Jewish historic relics are being destroyed. Pan told CongenOffs that Mayor Han Zheng personally asked Pan to investigate the reports, and Pan maintains that Hongkou District's key historic buildings remain intact, and that infrastructure development in the area is necessary to accommodate future traffic patterns. (Note: The NPR reporter who broke the demolition story later told CongenOff that she had requested an interview with Pan Guang prior to airing the story, but Pan had refused to meet with her. End Note.)

#### Practicing Judaism in Shanghai

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¶12. (C) Judaism is not one of China's five officially recognized religions, which are Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The lack of official recognition creates a difficult existence for the Jewish community in Shanghai and results in a political limbo that often leads to confrontation with local authorities. Due to the lack of recognition, Rabbi Greenberg cannot have an official place of worship and the Shanghai Jewish Center is run out of his home, under the guise of a for-profit consulting company. Local Chinese staff members officially are employees of the consulting company. A Synagogue that seats roughly 100 worshippers and can be reconfigured for various social activities is located in the basement of the house. Upstairs is a Jewish daycare center and preschool with 20-30 students. The school is not officially registered and is

explained to local government officials as "his children having a few friends over to play, every day."

¶13. (C) Events held at the Jewish Center are often investigated, interrupted and/or cancelled by local authorities. Most recently, the Rabbi received threats that police would block access to an event at the Center being held by the Israeli Consulate General to inform members of the community about the conflict in Gaza. During days of worship, local authorities monitor the Center to ensure that no Chinese passport holders are attending services. (Note: Foreign Protestants in Shanghai also attend expatriate church services which Chinese passport holders are prevented from attending. End Note.) The Rabbi describes his presence in Shanghai and the existence of the Shanghai Jewish Center as a balancing act. He constantly pushes the limits of religious freedom allowed by the local authorities. When the authorities push back, he yields and tries again later.

#### Recognition on the Horizon?

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¶14. (C) Shanghai Jews are left in limbo on the recognition issue until the Central Government decides whether or not to officially recognize Judaism. The perspective from Shanghai is that the Central Government potentially could recognize four religions in the near future: Judaism, Mormonism, Ba'hai, and Russian Orthodox. Yan pointed out, however, that in the eyes of Shanghai government officials, recognition of Judaism is not a significant issue. With such a small number of Jews practicing in Shanghai, all of them expatriate, there is only external pressure for recognition. In this way, Judaism is distinct from the officially recognized religions in China and others seeking recognition, all of which have active Chinese congregations.

¶15. (C) Shanghai academics also are watching the situation in Hong Kong and Macau, which they say poses a religious conundrum for the Chinese Government. Pan Guang stated that as China "globalizes," it will need to take into account other religions.

(Hong Kong has approximately 4,000 Jews.) However, Pan commented that official recognition of other religions will be dependent upon an overall stable political environment -- a direct reference to separatist and terrorist movements in other parts of China. He added, however, that there are no links between Judaism and extremist movements causing unrest in China.

On the contrary, the Jewish community in China has never proselytized, has always been well-respected and has brought positive cultural, social and economic development to China.

#### The Ohel Rachel Synagogue: Shanghai's own Temple Mount

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¶16. (C) The Ohel Rachel Synagogue has become a symbol for greater freedom for Jews to worship in Shanghai. The right to take ownership of Ohel Rachel is the principal demand of Shanghai's Jewish community. Rabbi Greenberg reports that this issue remains tied up in government bureaucracy. Without official recognition of Judaism as a religion, the Shanghai Municipal Government will not register an official place of worship for Jews, and therefore refuses to give the Jewish community control of Ohel Rachel.

¶17. (U) Opened in 1920, Ohel Rachel was the first of seven synagogues built in Shanghai and one of two that are still remaining. (The other remaining synagogue, the Ohel Moshe, has been refurbished by the Shanghai Government in cooperation with the USCPAH and is the location of the Jewish Museum.) After 1952, Ohel Rachel remained vacant for many years. In 1998-99, the Shanghai Government yielded to continuous pressure from the Jewish community and the Israeli and U.S. Governments, refurbishing the building and allowing the Jewish community to use the Ohel Rachel for 24 hours over Rosh Hashanah. (Note: Ever year the U.S. and Israeli Consuls General sign a joint letter to the Shanghai authorities requesting this use. End Note.) Rabbi Greenberg cited the 1998 visit to the synagogue by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton, Chelsea Clinton and Secretary of State Madeline Albright as a principal factor in gaining

greater access to Ohel Rachel for the Jewish community.  
Currently, the Jewish community is occasionally permitted to use  
the building during certain high holidays.

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